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Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Please recycle

The Turkish war of aggression against region of Afrin in the Syrian Arab Republic

The predominantly Kurdish enclave of Afrin in the outer north-west of Syria has been under attack by the Turkish army and Turkish-backed Islamist militias since January 20, 2018. President Erdogan is not willing to tolerate an autonomous Kurdish region – a home of cultural and religious diversity – in the neighboring state. Thus, he decided to block aid deliveries to the region. He deployed armed forces to the border of the Afrin region and started taking the first villages under artillery fire on January 14, 2018. Now, there are attacks with fighter jets, heavy artillery, and tanks.

This military operation is not directed against the so-called Islamic State (IS), as the Turkish government is claiming, but against the YPG – one of the most important allies against barbarism in Syria. The Kurdish autonomous region Rojava / Northern Syria is widely seen as a sign of hope regarding the possibility of a democratic and caring society in the embattled region, despite infrequent human rights violations.

The international community's responsibility

As a UN member, Turkey must refrain from any war of aggression. The region of Afrin does not belong to the Turkish state territory – and it is not a threat to Turkey. Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations prohibits the use of force and according threats. In its resolution 3314, the General Assembly of the United Nations provided a definition of a war of aggression. The Rome Statute, the legal basis of the International Criminal Court, prohibits wars of aggression as well. Thus, the UN must respond promptly if a member state violates the UN Charter by starting a war of aggression against a de-facto autonomous region (Afrin) on the territory of another independent state (Syria). The Syrian state is not able or not willing to protect the autonomous region of Afrin against the Turkish war of aggression. The Syrian state did not approve of this war. Instead, Syria clearly condemned the military operations as a "war of aggression".

As a result, the Turkish attacks against Afrin are to be seen as a violation of international law. They were neither approved by the Syrian government nor authorized by the United Nations Security Council – and the Turkish Government cannot justify its actions by the right to self-defense since Turkey was not attacked. The UN and other international organizations must therefore do everything they can to put an end to Turkey's war of aggression against Afrin and northern Syria, immediately. This war must be condemned, and all parties to the conflict must show commitment to find a peaceful, internationally accepted solution to the question of the Kurdish people in Syria – involving the representatives of the local autonomous self-government – and to uphold human rights.

The suffering of the civilian population

This war of aggression has already caused a humanitarian catastrophe; tens of thousands of people are on the run, trying to find protection from the Turkish airstrikes in mountain caves and olive groves. There are targeted attacks on infrastructure buildings and fuel storages. Even the only water reservoir in the region – Maydanke, which supplies at least 300,000 people with drinking water – is in danger, as several shells came down in the immediate vicinity.

According to official Kurdish data, hundreds civilians have so far been injured, and 127 lost their lives. The Turkish army stated that a total number of 343 so-called "terrorists" were killed, and the Turkish government claimed that the military operation is not aimed against the civilian population, which is why the Turkish army was proceeding "with great care". However, considering the use of heavy artillery, missile launchers, and fighter jets, this statement by the Turkish government is quite implausible. On Sunday evening (January 21, at 10 pm), 72 Turkish fighter planes attacked 108 targets in Afrin, including the villages Sherawa, Bilbile, Raco, and Shera. (Effective January 27, 2018, at 11:15 am)

War against minorities

Yazidis

The Turkish Air Force has already attacked almost all Yazidi villages or villages with Yazidi population in the outer regions of Afrin along Mount Simon – such as Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo, and Ain Dara. In order to find shelter from the attacks of the Turkish fighter planes, the inhabitants of the Yazidi villages try to hide in the mountain caves of nearby Mount Simon. There are about 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis living in the region – in the city, the 21 Yazidi villages, or in villages with Yazidi population. The Yazidis fear the worst. Most

of all, they are afraid of the radical Islamists militias, who are supported by Turkey. The Yazidis are sure that there are former IS fighters among them. IS had already attacked the Yazidis of Afrin in 2013, and the Yazidi settlement area in Iraq, the Sinjar region, had been partially conquered by IS in August 2014. Back then, thousands of Yazidis had been killed or kidnapped. Many Yazidis had fled to the Sinjar Mountains, where they were encircled by the Islamist militias. They had to hold out there without drinking water – at temperatures around 40 degrees Celsius. Back then, the Syrian-Kurdish YPG, which are now under attack by Turkey, had saved tens of thousands of Yazidis from certain death.

Alawis, Christians, and refugees

On January 27, 2018, Turkish fighter planes attacked the district of Mabata (at around 4:00 am), causing another massacre in the ongoing invasion operation against northern Syria. Seven members of the same family got killed in the bombing. Traditionally, there are many Alawi Kurds living in Mabata. Like the Yazidis, they are in mortal danger. For the radical Islamists, the Alawis are apostates who have to be eliminated.

On January 21, Pastor Valentine Hanan addressed the international community on behalf of the "Good Shepherd Church" in Afrin with the following words: "Please, fellow Christians, protect our people in Afrin!" He called on the civilized world to protect the small Christian community of Afrin. Since most of Afrin's Christians – about 1,000 people – converted from Islam to Christianity, the Turkish soldiers and Syrian Islamists consider them to be "outlawed". The few Armenians living in Afrin have to fear for their lives as well.

The refugees in Afrin are in acute danger too. Thus, the refugee camp "Robar" (where about 3120 refugees are living at the moment) was repeatedly attacked by the Turkish army, and Turkey is apparently not willing to spare cultural goods or historic sites. There was an airstrike against the remains of a temple from the late Hittite period, built between 1300 and 800 BC, near Tell Ain Dara.

War propaganda and instrumentalization of religion

The Turkish Government is also violating Article 20 (a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This pact prohibits war propaganda. The Turkish government, however, is spreading war propaganda – to an extent not yet known – and is persecuting every Turkish citizen who dares to criticize this war.1 In this context, the Turkish government is even instrumentalizing religious issues.

Afrin

The city of Afrin is the capital of the eponymous canton of Afrin. In the course of the Syrian civil war, in June 2012, the Kurdish PYD party and other groups took control of Afrin in order to prevent chaos. At that time, the Syrian state had withdrawn from Afrin. The city of Afrin is located about 55 kilometers to the north-west of Aleppo, in the river valley of the river Afrin. It is estimated that the city of Afrin had between 44,000 and 80,000 inhabitants before the Syrian civil war. At the beginning of the Turkish war of aggression (January 20), there were nearly one million people living in the Afrin region, about fifty percent of them refugees, especially from Aleppo. Of the three larger cities in the Kurdish enclaves in Syria, Afrin is the only one that is not located directly at the border to Turkey, but about 25 kilometers away. Most of the Kurds in the Afrin region are Sunni Muslims, but there is also a Kurdish-Alawite village, and tens of thousands of Yazidis living in different villages. Recently, a small Christian Protestant church was built in Afrin.

What the Turkish government intends to do in Afrin is to expel the Kurds and to encourage other ethnic groups to settle there, which is to be seen as ethnic cleansing.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN HRC members to:

- Call for be immediate action at all levels below military intervention in order to put an end to the Turkish war of aggression.
- Condemn the Turkish war of aggression against Afrin.
- Call for the documentation and punishment of war crimes by the Turkish military and the Syrian Islamists. The perpetrators must be held accountable. Human rights violations by all warring parties must be brought to light.